

**Amendments to the Specification:**

Please replace the fourth paragraph on page 4 with the following amended paragraph:

The furnace assembly **100** includes a furnace **101**, a process gas supply system **150** and a preform positioning and rotating system **140**. The furnace **101** includes a tubular muffle **110** having an inlet opening **112**, an outlet opening **114** and an annular flange **116**. The muffle **110** defines a furnace passage **111** having a lower end **110A** and an upper end **110B**. A top plate **120** covers the outlet opening **114** and interfaces with the flange **116**. The top plate **120** has a lower surface **120A** and an upper surface **120B** opposed thereto and a central opening **122**. The muffle **110** and top plate **120** are preferably formed of fused silica, fused quartz, ceramic, ceramic coated fused silica, or ceramic coated fused quartz. The top plate **120** rests upon and contacts the terminal end of the tubular muffle **110** at the annular flange **116** of the upper end **110B**. The top plate **120** extends radially inward from the tubular muffle **110** and covers the outlet opening.

Please replace the fourth paragraph on page 6 with the following amended paragraph:

A plurality of washers **172**, **174** are positioned over the opening **122** with the handle body **132** extending through central openings **172A**, **174A** formed therein. Preferably, the openings **172A**, **174A** are sized to fit loosely (slip fit) against the handle body **132**. A lower surface of washer **174** rests upon and contacts the upper surface **120B** of the top plate **120**. The washers **172**, **174** are preferably formed of solid fused silica, fused quartz, ceramic, or silicon carbide.